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B4 GROUNDBREAKING MUSIC

ROCK CLASS '60s culture meets today's digital frontier

CONTINUED FROM B1

And while I started absorbing the beginnings of rock by osmosis around age 7 or 8 – the music now over 50 years old, a cultural revolution turned mainstream – there were so many sounds I wasn't up to speed on. In other words, rap and hip-hop, a form still in its infancy in 1980 when I left my first tour covering Planet Rock.

So while researching this course – be true to your school! – I dug into old-school hip-hop, with rappers gleefully tasting the deliciousness of their rhymes, then politicizing them, pioneering stuff that's stood the test of time, before bling-bling reared its banal head.

And now I was cramming, like a student, getting the changes down of a music that over the decades has sprouted more nongrel offshoots than I could ever imagine. I was a kid again – "in my room," as Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys once harmonized – poring over books and magazines like I used to (and, now, websites and videos), hooked and amazed at the originality and magic of the music, past and present.

I was searching for a theme that could link the generations of rock, some "hook" I could riff on throughout the course. Then – awophopaloobopl – it struck me: Of all musical forms, rock most transparently absorbs other kinds of music, from blues to classical; anchored by a backbeat, it's bastardized hybrid music at heart. Its history has always been marked by copying, stealing, and the ability to absorb very disparate influences. Like no other music, rock was also borne of lightning changes of technology.

What I didn't expect was how personally I took the music in public. The primacy of the sounds got to me, like I was discovering them for the first time. Biofeedback time: "Baby-baby, baby you're out of time," sang the Rolling Stones in '66, or Time Out of Mind, as Bob Dylan titled his comeback album 30 years later. I was in over my head in a flood of suddenly recurrent memories – 19 again in a 45-year-old body. The torque between teen spirit and aged corpus left me exhausted, achy and high after each lecture.

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Today, music is considered both a birthright and a business, proliferating in an explosion of digital media, anywhere, anytime. A hush enveloped the classroom as I asked the students to imagine a world without the Internet, the cellphone and the iPod, a world where you needed access to radio. Rock 'n' roll's very existence on radio was like the Rosetta stone, but the rest was up to chance.

In the summer of '64, when I was 16, I spent many nights huddled over the radio, turning the dial in search of the cool new sounds of Beatlemania and its Top 40 "counterculture," unleashed on young people all too ready to be hijacked by them. As I started compiling playlists for today's young, I flashed back to a September night when I placed my father's old reel-to-reel Telefunken tape recorder next to the kitchen RCA radio and self-consciously made a document of the musical times that were a-changin' every week.

At that time of night, New York and Boston stations often came in clear as a bell. Static only added to the authenticity, reminding you of great distances bridged by a new spirit and sound. My tape was rock 'n' roll pastiche as random happening, airwaves dense with exploding music.

Speak, memory: The Beatles with A Hard Day's Night (which premiered in North American cinemas the previous month). Their earlier hits, when they topped the British charts while Americans mourned John F. Kennedy, were now played as "oldies" alongside the current continuum. The Animals crunked up the volume on the solemn guitar-and-bass intro to House of the Rising Sun, instantly recognizable, the lads from Newcastle-on-Tyne drenched in American R&B and proud of it. Roy Orbison had a similar "dig this" twangy guitar grabber on Oh, Pretty Woman.

You could always recognize a Motown record ("The Sound of Young America"): high treble notes, echoed bass and rhythm sections, tambourines, surreal jazzy underpinnings (vibraphone), supercharged strings.

The surf sound celebrated sun, sea and, mostly, cars: I Get Around by the Beach Boys, with the immortal line of teen dissatisfaction, "I'm gittin' bugged drivin' up 'n' down the same old strip / Got to find a new place where the kids are hip."

And funky girl groups: I often confused the Ronettes' Walkin' In the Rain, with its dramatic thunderclap start, with the Shangri-Las' Remember (Walkin' in the Sand), with its haunting fadeout ("You were so inviting ... the night was so exciting").

Just a short time earlier, in another era, radio oozed manufactured pap (Frankie Avalon, The Singing Nun) that narcotized millions of kids. The gush of groundbreaking rock 'n' roll inspired by Beatlemania was literally a gulp of fresh air. The music was fundamentally changing society, a power-shift between parents and progeny.

This radio noodling accounted for my first intensely interior listening experiences, sounds colliding like atoms inside my head. If there was something intoxicatingly self-conscious about taping those kaleidoscopic sounds, so too was playing them for 90 students. This was what Dylan meant when he sang, in the summer of '65, "You know something is happening, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones."

FROM GAZETTE FILES

Juan Rodriguez touches on many rock icons in his class including: (top row) James Brown and Frank Zappa, (middle row) Quebecer Robert Charlebois, Roy Orbison and Blondie's Deborah Harry, and groups like the Ronettes and the Ramones.

What was happening in the winter of '09 was this: When I played these tunes, it was tough to be cool or glib or blasé or rehearsed, let alone academic, about what I was hearing, and what I could say about it. My sweet youth, gone but not gone. In fact, now exposed (indecently?) in front of my students. Uh-oh ...

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As I struggled to get some flow to the classes, I discovered that in some ways I was not so much teaching as performing – playing Monsieur DJ – and thus finally sharing an experience similar to the hundreds of acts I've reviewed. I was an entertainer now, the audience consuming my historical baggage. An unsettling feeling: Am I these kids' nostalgia act?

Still, I told my stories – the times I met Janis Joplin, James Brown, Deborah Harry and John Lennon, the Stones, Ramones and Village People – tales that may well represent some desperate lifeline in my inner-psyche. Winging it, sitting behind my MacBook, part of me felt like Gramps and part like DJ Shadow.

I became aware of the differences between my memories and the students' fresh perceptions of the old music I celebrated, and my perceptions (jaded?) of the '90s music that marked their adolescence only a few years ago, music I am not nearly as intimately aware of.

Would my baggage, having grown up with rock as it grew up – something following generations can never lay claim to – be considered condescending, despite my wonderment at today's progressive sounds? Maybe I was looking for some sort of generational twain-shall-meet epiphany. In the end, all I knew was how close I felt to them.

One thing time has taught me is that today's music shares similarities with what's been done before – and not. If rock has always been self-referential, now it's postmodern to boot, floating in a digital frontier. But a fascination with the immortals, especially prematurely dead icons, is alive and well. On the closing 46-second chord of A Day in the Life, you could hear a pin drop, the students in thrall with an inescapable sound.

Friday mornings started with a view of sleepy eyes and coffee, students in bell-bottom blues, T-shirts and hoodies, ponytails and rumpled hair, as I served up music, music, music to satisfy the soul (and, ahem, mind).

Among this year's crop of essay topics: The influence and impact of the Beatles (about half a dozen variations); the various roles music plays in; everyday life (whoa!); the history of noise rock in Montreal (the most erudite essay); how music industry changes affect new indie groups; several takes on drugs and rock; heavy metal as interpreted in different cultures; the effect of home-grown punk-metal groups on Polish society; the influence of rock on society and society's influence on rock; Robert Charlebois's impact on France and the '60s and '70s; La scène metal underground en France, 1980-2000; a study on music and emotional health ("trying to make a parallel with the eternal youth of baby-boomer rockers"); what makes Motown evergreen and popular; the influence of Serge Gainsbourg on anglo and franco music; an analysis of identity ambiguity (Bowie, Beatles); Japanese pop; British groups vs. U.S. groups; the Birth of Punk, from Velvet Underground to Iggy Pop & the Stooges; the politicization of lyrics in Québécois culture; the legacies of Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin; several takes on women in rock; how and why people still identify with Elvis; the role of Fender guitars (Stratocaster, Telecaster, etc.) in rock history; and, inevitably, post-rock.

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I wondered about the role of nostalgia in studying music. We've got Stylus years of rock to hold onto, joining boomers and Gen Xers and beyond; my parents had only 20 years of the swing and ballad era upon which to harp. "Our music is the best." Nostalgia notwithstanding, today feels to me like a whole other frontier. New breathtaking technologies are creating new sounds and new ways of making music and getting it to the consumer. It was tempting to compare generational icons, to say that no one has equalled Jimi Hendrix's sheer creativity on electric guitar. And yet: Technology has helped propel Portishead or Radiohead or Outkast to profound sonic heights. It's useless trying to decide who's better, and which era rules.

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A strike by profs closed down UQAM in April. I was out of luck in trying to slip into the home stretch of what could now only be called a highly selective history. How was I going to cover the last 30 years in four remaining classes? Existentialism 101 – like a rolling stone, with no direction home. To refute the Stones, time was not on my side. I couldn't cover everybody, so I decided on narrowing the focus to seminal developmental events and styles (reggae, punk, hip-hop).

But where are, um ... the Pixies, the Pogues, the Smiths? (ohmygod!) What to do about U2, Springsteen, Michael Jackson ... and other hypes I simply do not like. Here's where I had to make sure the students knew these were mere opinions: That the Beatles were more important as a social phenomenon than as musicians (though they were terrifically creative catalysts, they weren't alone in the '60s creative onslaught); that Woodstock was the commodification of youth lifestyle ("Is that a real poncho or is that a Sears poncho?" sneered Frank Zappa in Cosmik Debris); that there was a perennial class warfare between the middle-class hippie-dippie Woodstock crowd and the working-class disco denizens with Saturday Night Fever on their minds.

How could I make the connection between '60s rock culture as a dramatic changer of society and today's digital frontier remaking centuries of assumptions on human nature? I found my opinions changing and/or deepening as I looked through the lens of history with the fervor of fan and archivist. Every time I listened, I seemed to discover something new.

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At 7 on the morning of my last class, after five hours of sleep, I felt loosey-goosey, even serene in not knowing what I was going to "teach" at 9. It was more like what the moment was about to teach me. After I strolled over to the master system to turn up the volume of Steppenwolf's Born to Be Wild so students could hear the "heavy-metal thunder" reference properly ... something compelled me to go crazy with dance, making fun of my exaggerated moves. Spontaneous applause for air-guitar, air-motorcycle performance art by middle-aged "professor."

I played Gainsbourg's dark Love on the Beat, with its hideous female screams, then turned to Melody Nelson, his sweet 1971 concept album, recently re-released with notes in English and at last a review from Rolling Stone. "There is no anglo equivalent of Serge Gainsbourg, and yet this book" – I brandished the Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock 'n' Roll – "has no entry for him! Les ostid américains, and their xenophobia!" With that, I threw the tome down on the floor and took out my Bic lighter, aping Jimi himself. "Oops, I forgot my lighter fluid!"

I left the book there while I squeezed in another artist who never made the cover of the Rollin' Stone: Zappa. I chose his prescient Cocaine Decisions (1983), about the "high-class" Wall Streeters who make the cocaine decisions that "make my life such a mess," dutifully mentioning Zappa's hybrid of L.A. rhythm & blues with Bartok and Stravinsky but skipping his important 1985 testimony to Congress on record labelling, because I wanted to play a couple of minutes of Montreal noise artist Tim Hecker.

With minutes to go, I felt myself bombing, regarding what I wanted to do. I wanted to get across the sense of continuity in popular music of the last half of the 20th century, but also its quintessential postmodernism, rock's capacity to be anything to all peoples. But at UQAM, the sands of time had run out: I was defeated by rock's richness.

Now it was time for advice: I told them that I didn't consider exams to be a reflection of a student's true worth, "because every day is an opportunity to learn something new." The exam would be basic, I said, offering clues what to read; I wasn't a tough guy "Express yourself." (This from self-serving necessity, with the exam based on only four classes.) I felt a lump in my throat.

"I've played you the music of my youth, and as I look out at you I see my past – but more importantly the future – and something clicks in my brain. I don't know what it is – I'm trying to figure it out – but I've learned a lot from you and for that I thank you." Like, perhaps, "Ah but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now."

Two guys, who sat up front and never missed a class, came to say goodbys. When I asked them for the subject of their term paper, I smiled at the answer: Why Today's Young People Are Interested In The History of Rock. "Ah! Absolument génial!" And I couldn't wait to read it, and all the essays. Chuck Berry said it: "Hail, hail rock 'n' roll, deliver me from the days of old." The kids are alright.

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